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ABSTRACT

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Research Report No. 74

THE INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS' TOLERANCES FOR SPECIFIC KINDS OF BEHAVIORS ON THEIR RATINGS OF A THIRD GRADE STUDENT

Bob Algozzine, James Ysseldyke, and Sandra Christenson

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THE INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS' TOLERANCES FOR SPECIFIC KINDS OF BEHAVIORS ON THEIR RATINGS OF A THIRD GRADE STUDENT

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April, 1982

Abstract

Approximately 120 regular classroom teachers were asked to read a case study and respond to 13 questions about the student portrayed in it. In addition, at a later time the teachers completed a checklist that indicated the extent to which certain student behaviors bothered them. Results indicated that the teachers' ratings of the student were affected differentially by their tolerance for the primary behaviors exhibited by the pupil. Ratings of an immature child were influenced by teacher tolerances while ratings of an unmanageable student were not; the unmanageable student was rated more negatively overall. The concept of the "ideal" student is presented in the discussion of the results and their implications.

The Influence of Teachers' Tolerances for Specific Kinds of Behaviors on their Ratings of a Third Grade Student

School-related behavior problems always have been prevalent in America's schools (Sarason & Doris, 1979), and a variety of explanations have been set forth for the origins of these problems (Quay, 1973; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1982). Academic and behavior problems may be viewed as the direct result of experiential defects, process dysfunctions, experiential deficits, or as a result of interaction among these factors (Quay, 1973). From an ecological perspective, behavior, in and of itself, is not problematic, deviant, or abnormal. A behavior is considered a problem as a function of the time it occurs, the place it occurs, the person who exhibits the behavior, and the person who sees it (a socially sanctioned labeler) (Ullman & Krasner, 1969). In school settings, the same behavior may be regarded as normal or abnormal as a function of the time and place in which it occurs; most importantly, problems are a function of the teachers (or other school personnel) who observe the behavior and their tolerance for it.

Rubin and Balow (1978) reported the results of a longitudinal investigation of 1,586 students, and indicated the following:

> [The] most striking finding of this study was the high percentage of children who were identified as exhibiting behavior problems by at least one teacher during the course of their elementary school careers. More than half (58.6 percent) of all subjects who received three or more teacher ratings were classified as a behavior problem at least once. Among students who received six teacher ratings, 60 percent (68 percent of the boys and 51 percent of the girls) were considered a behavior problem by at least one teacher. (p. 109)

Current rates of referral for psychoeducational evaluation are extremely high. Algozzine, Ysseldyke, and Christenson (1982) report that

nationally, four to six percent of the public school population is being referred for psychoeducational evaluation each year. Christenson, Algozzine, and Ysseldyke (1981) report that 92% of referred students are tested, while 73% of referred students are declared eligible for special education services. Clearly, problems in school are common for many of America's children.

Teachers' views of the causes for students' "problems" are interesting. In 1979, the research staff of the National Education Association (NEA) surveyed teachers to ascertain their perceptions of why students do poorly in school. They found that 81% of teachers placed the blame for school difficulties on the student's home and family life, 14% blamed the students themselves; only 1% blamed inadequate instruction, while 4% attributed problems to the ways in which schools were organized. Clearly, the behaviors that students exhibit cause teachers to take a variety of actions with them, and the decisions made by teachers influence the lives and life opportunities of students.

Two recent investigations have reported an interaction between the kinds of behaviors that students exhibit and teachers' tolerance for those behaviors in influencing the decisions made and actions taken with students. Curran and Algozzine (1980) found that decisions related to mainstreaming were influenced by teachers' opinions about demonstrated classroom behaviors. Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1981) found that the most influential piece of information in a simulation of psychoeducational decision making was student behavior at the time of referral.

In this investigation we examined the extent to which teacher

decisions about a student were influenced by the student's characteristics in interaction with the teacher's stated tolerance for those characteristics. Ratings of case studies for an immature or unmanageable student were compared for teachers with differing levels of tolerance for those same behaviors.

Method

Subjects

Elementary school teachers (n=116) participated in the study; 92% of the teachers worked in public school classrooms. The sample was comprised mostly of females (84%) from urban or suburban schools (70%) with school populations below 15,000 students (68%). Between 2 and 11 teachers were included from each elementary grade (grades 1-7). The participants all had bachelor's degrees and many had master's degrees as well. Approximately half of the teachers (n=57) were randomly assigned to read a case study describing a child with immature behavior; others (n=59) received a description of an unmanageable student. The demographic data for both samples are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedures

The teachers were selected randomly from a national list of regular education teachers; the list was purchased from Market Data Retrieval. Each teacher was sent an initial letter explaining the study and offering payment for participation. Upon receipt of a signature indicating willingness to be included in the sample, each teacher was sent a case study and short questionnaire. A demographic survey form and Disturbing

Behavior Checklist II (Algozzine, 1979) were sent subsequent to receipt of the first questionnaire; contracts arranging for payment also were included in the second set of materials. A two-week time limit was suggested for completion of each part of the study; follow-up letters and postcards were used to encourage the return of completed materials.

Case studies. Two different summaries describing a third grade boy were prepared; a student demonstrating socially immature behaviors was described in one and a student exhibiting unmanageable behaviors was described in the other. The case studies were consistent in format. Each contained sections of similar information in the following areas: medical, developmental, family, school history, test information, and third grade classroom observations. Assessment information was within the average range for a student of similar age and grade. Different behaviors were included to portray the immature or unmanageable student. For example, limited expressive ability, very shy, insecure, and delayed age-appropriate social skills were checked as concerns in the case study of the immature child; other items of a similar nature were interspersed within the case study narrative. Different behaviors (e.g., rude, defiant, lacks motivation) were "concerns" included in the narrative for the unmanageable student.

Dependent questionnnaire. After reviewing the case summary, teachers' ratings of the child were obtained by means of a short questionnaire. Specifically, teachers were asked to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do you think David has a behavior problem?
2. To what extent do you think David has a learning problem?
3. To what extent do you think David is eligible for Special Education services?

Responses were collected on a Likert scale (1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely). Teachers also were asked to make predictions about David's school performance (1 = deficient/poor, 5 = superior/excellent) in 10 areas: academic achievement, visual and/or auditory perception, memory skills, fine and/or gross motor performance, attending behaviors, completion of assignments, social acceptance, ability to follow directions, acceptance of responsibility, and self-concept. Scores on these items were compared.

Independent variable. Approximately two weeks after completing the questionnaire, teachers were asked to supply demographic information and rate the extent to which certain behaviors bothered them. The Disturbing Behavior Checklist II (DBC-II) contains 51 items derived from case folders of students classified as learning disabled (LD) or from LD textbooks (Algozzine, 1979); each item is rated on a 1 (not very disturbing) to 5 (very disturbing) scale. Sutherland, Algozzine, Foster, and Wail (1979) identified three factors within the DBC-II; behaviors that were bothersome to teachers were contained in each. The first factor of disturbing items (general perceptual problems) included problems such as written reversals, poor word attack skills, and being unable to blend sounds. Unmanageable behaviors (Factor 2), such as rudeness, impulsivity, irritability, and hyperactivity, and immature behaviors (Factor 3) such as insecurity, anxiety, and inadequate self-concept also were found to be disturbing to teachers. In this research, average scores on the immature and unmanageable behavior factors of the DBC-II were used to group teachers into those with more or less tolerance for the specific behaviors in the factors.

Teachers receiving the case summary for an immature or unmanageable student were subdivided into two additional groups each. Those with ratings greater than the sample mean on Factor 3 (i.e., immaturity) on the DBC-II who received the case study describing an immature student were compared to teachers whose ratings were below the mean on that factor. Similarly, the teachers who received the unmanageable student's case study summary were divided based on their responses to the items comprising Factor 2 (i.e., unmanageable behaviors) of the DBC-II. In this way, the effects of teacher tolerances for behaviors on their ratings of a student exhibiting those same behaviors were evaluated.

Data Analysis

Two sets of *t* tests were completed. High and low tolerance groups were compared on 13 different responses related to a student exhibiting immature or unmanageable behaviors. Because of the large number of tests, two stringent criteria were set for significance testing; the 0.01 *alpha* level was used for statistical tests and a 0.5 unit difference between means was applied in an attempt to separate trivial findings from important ones.

Results

Teachers were required to rate the extent to which the case study student had a behavior problem, a learning problem, and was eligible for special education services; similarly, predictions in 10 areas of school-related functioning were solicited. Comparisons of ratings made by teachers more tolerant of immature behavior and those less tolerant of the same behavior were completed. Means and standard deviations of teachers' ratings for a student exhibiting immature behavior are presented

in Table 2. No differences were indicated in the teachers' ratings of the immature student's current problems (i.e., academic or behavior) or eligibility for special education; however, it should be noted that the ratings of the less tolerant teachers were less favorable in each case than those of tolerant teachers.

Insert Table 2 about here

Significant differences were indicated in teachers' predictions of the future classroom and interpersonal behaviors of the immature student (see Table 2). Tolerant teachers (n=27) rated nine of the ten prediction areas higher than the intolerant teachers (n=29). Predictions for academic achievement, memory skills, and motor performance were higher for tolerant teachers; similarly, attending behaviors, completion of assignments, and ability to follow directions were rated more highly by teachers who were more tolerant of immature behavior. Interpersonal skills such as social acceptance, self-concept, and acceptance of responsibility also were rated differentially by tolerant and intolerant teachers.

No differences were indicated for ratings of the unmanageable student (see Table 3). Teachers with different levels of tolerance rated a student exhibiting unmanageable behavior similarly. It should be noted, however, that the judgments about this student were more negative than those made about the immature child. For example, special education eligibility was rated as more likely ($\bar{X}$ = 3.85) for the unmanageable student than for the student exhibiting immature behaviors ($\bar{X}$ = 3.25); a similar pattern was evident in other ratings as well. This suggests that the

unmanageable student is more likely to be viewed as a problem regardless of one's tolerance for behavior that is exhibited, and that different reactions may occur in teachers faced with an "immature" student.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

Mixed results were obtained in this investigation of the extent to which teachers' tolerances for different kinds of behaviors influenced their perceptions of students who exhibited those behaviors. Consistently, teachers' tolerances for specific kinds of behaviors did not significantly influence the extent to which they saw students who exhibited those behaviors as having learning problems, behavior problems, or as eligible for special education. However, teachers did have different prognoses for students who exhibited immature behaviors, and their prognoses were a direct function of their tolerance for those behaviors. Teachers who were not bothered by immature behaviors held higher expectations for a student who evidenced immature behavior than did teachers who were bothered by immature behaviors. In contrast, no differences were indicated in ratings of the unmanageable student by teachers with different tolerance for exhibited behaviors. Overall, a student with unmanageable behaviors was viewed less favorably than one with immature behaviors.

In discussing the relation between "teachers' perceptions and educational decisions," Kornblau and Keogh (1980) indicated that:

> The complexities of teacher-pupil interaction have long interested educational researchers, yet it seems fair to say that the nature of the functional "match" between

> pupil and teacher remains uncertain. Fortunately, in most classrooms both child and teacher can tolerate considerable discrepancy from an ideal match. In the case of exceptional children, however, the match may be especially important, since they may be less able to tolerate incompatibilities with teachers' expectations and styles. It it interesting to note that the historical and still common response to pupils who "don't fit" in the regular educational program is to exclude them. Current legislation, however, has mandated the inclusion of exceptional children into regular programs wherever feasible. Consideration of teacher-pupil interaction thus becomes practical and urgent. (p. 87).

It is interesting to note their concern for the child's limited tolerance in appropriate educational "matches."

In 1970, Rist suggested that teachers' views of "ideal" students influence perceptions and evaluations of actual students. Recently, Kornblau (1979) identified three dimensions of behaviors that characterized "ideal, teachable" students; she labeled them: cognitive-motivational behaviors, school appropriate behaviors, and personal social behaviors. Behaviors that characterize "ideal" students are <u>not</u> included on the disturbing behavior checklists.

Student behaviors are a function of a complex set of interactions; to a large degree, problems are thought to originate in the life experiences of the <u>child</u> (cf. National Education Association, 1979; Quay, 1973). Kornblau and Keogh (1980) indicate that "understanding pupils' progress in school also involves consideration of the teachers' perceptions and expectations" (pp. 98-99). They also suggest that teachers' expectations for individual students are "in part influenced by their values of the characteristics of a model ideal pupil, and that discrepancies from this model affect the formation of self-generated expectations" (p. 99).

In this research, less than "ideal" characteristics were manipulated in case studies and evaluated by regular education teachers; in part, evaluations were influenced by tolerance for the characteristics. The results have implications for diagnostic and prescriptive practice. Simply evaluating the psychoeducational characteristics of the child appears to be a limited diagnostic practice; clearly, the child's teacher is an important factor in any referral for evaluation. Similarly, planning instructional intervention without concern for teacher tolerances and/or expectations for differing types of students will likely result in limited educational outcomes. As Kornblau and Keogh (1980) indicate, "it is not realistic to expect teachers to work equally effectively with all pupils; but it is realistic to expect teachers to be sensitive to their own perceptions of their pupils" (p. 99). We believe that tolerances for less than ideal behaviors are an important factor in developing sensitive programs for school-aged students.

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Footnote

Bob Algozzine is also an Associate Professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Florida, Gainesville.

Table 1

Demographic Data for Participating Teachers

Variable	Sample One[a]	Sample Two[b]
Teacher Sex		
Male	16%	15%
Female	84%	85%
Teacher Age		
Under 25	9%	0%
25-34	28%	39%
35-44	34%	32%
45-54	12%	24%
55-64	16%	5%
Years of Teaching Experience		
Less than 1 year	5%	0%
1-2 years	5%	0%
3-5 years	16%	5%
6-9 years	20%	17%
10-15 years	18%	46%
More than 16 years	36%	32%
Type of School		
Public	90%	93%
Private	10%	7%
School Location		
Urban	27%	44%
Suburban	44%	24%
Rural	29%	32%
School Population		
Below 3000	36%	30%
3000-6999	14%	20%
7000-9999	13%	7%
10000-14999	7%	5%
15000-24999	4%	11%
25000-49999	9%	5%
50000-74999	7%	9%
Over 75,000	10%	13%
Grade Level Taught		
First	18%	17%
Second	12%	19%
Third	18%	17%
Fourth	20%	14%
Fifth	9%	17%
Sixth	9%	4%
Seventh	14%	12%

[a] n=57

[b] n=59

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Teachers' Ratings of the Immature Student

Item[a]	Group: Tolerant $\bar{X}$	Tolerant SD	Not Tolerant $\bar{X}$	Not Tolerant SD
Judgment[b]				
Behavior Problem	2.9	1.4	2.2	0.8
Learning Problem	3.4	1.1	3.8	1.0
Special Education Services	3.0	1.3	3.5	1.2
Prediction[c]				
Academic Achievement*	2.8	0.7	2.2	0.8
Visual and/or Auditory Perception*	3.0	0.6	2.6	0.9
Memory Skills*	2.9	0.8	2.3	0.7
Fine and/or Gross Motor Peformance*	2.9	0.8	2.4	0.8
Attending Behaviors*	3.0	0.8	2.3	1.0
Completion of Assignments*	3.1	1.0	2.3	1.1
Social Acceptance*	2.9	0.9	2.2	0.9
Ability to Follow Directions*	3.1	0.9	2.5	1.0
Acceptance of Responsibility*	3.1	0.9	2.5	1.0
Self-Concept*	3.2	1.2	2.5	1.3

[a] A significant difference ($p < .01$) between the ratings of the two groups is indicated by *.

[b] Items were rated on a scale from 1 (Very Unlikely) to 5 (Very Likely).

[c] Items were rated on a scale from 1 (Deficient/Poor) to 5 (Superior/Excellent).

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Teachers' Ratings of the Unmanageable Student

Item[a]	Group: Tolerant $\bar{X}$	Tolerant SD	Not Tolerant $\bar{X}$	Not Tolerant SD
Judgment[b]				
Behavior Problem	4.7	0.5	4.6	0.9
Learning Problem	3.4	1.1	3.8	1.1
Special Education Services	3.8	1.2	3.9	1.1
Prediction[c]				
Academic Achievement	2.0	0.8	2.2	0.9
Visual and/or Auditory Perception	3.1	0.8	3.0	0.8
Memory Skills	2.7	0.9	2.7	1.0
Fine and/or Gross Motor Performance	3.0	0.7	3.0	0.9
Attending Behaviors	2.1	1.0	1.9	0.9
Completion of Assignments	2.3	1.1	2.2	1.2
Social Acceptance	2.3	1.1	2.0	1.1
Ability to Follow Directions	2.4	0.9	2.1	0.9
Acceptance of Responsibility	2.4	0.9	2.0	1.1
Self-Concept	2.6	1.2	2.2	1.3

[a] Differences between groups were not significant for any of the items.

[b] Items were rated on a scale from 1 (Very Unlikely) to 5 (Very Likely).

[c] Items were rated on a scale from 1 (Deficient/Poor) to 5 (Superior/Excellent).

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